

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

RECORD OF DECISION

Final General Management Plan
Environmental Impact Statement

Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area
Kentucky and Tennessee

INTRODUCTION

The Department of the Interior, National Park Service (NPS), has prepared this Record of Decision (ROD) on the *Final General Management Plan and Environmental Impact Statement* (FGMP/EIS) for Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area (the “National Area”) in Kentucky and Tennessee. This ROD is a statement of the decision made, the background of the project, other alternatives considered, the basis for the decision, the environmentally preferable alternative, measures to minimize environmental harm, and public involvement in the decision-making process.

DECISION (Selected Action)

The NPS will implement Alternative D, the preferred alternative, as described in the FGMP/EIS issued in March 2005.

Under Alternative D, the NPS will increase recreational opportunities and enhance visitor use and experience, while at the same time improving protection of natural and cultural resources. A total of eight (8) management zones will be created for the National Area, each of which will be attended with particularized management prescriptions. The management zones in the selected action are as follows:

1. *Natural Environment Recreation Zone* – This zone will apply to natural landscape areas suitable for and capable of sustaining dispersed recreation. It will cover most of the National Area.
2. *Sensitive Resource Protection Zone* – This zone will apply to natural and cultural areas and features that are particularly vulnerable to damage or deterioration by natural forces or human disturbance. It will cover such areas and features as cliff edges, cliff faces, rock shelters, arches and chimneys, cultural spaces, wetlands, special status species, rivers and streams, and special scenery.

3. *First Order Development and Visitor Use Zone* – This zone will designate readily accessible concentrations of visitor or administrative facilities. These areas will typically be heavily used and, with the exception of the Blue Heron mine exhibit area, will be located outside of the designated gorge.
4. *Second Order Development and Visitor Use Zone* – This zone will designate areas of limited visitor facility development typically situated at or near a resource attraction. This zone will only occur outside the gorge, except where associated with a legislatively designated gorge access route.
5. *Access Zone* – This zone will designate small sites that provide convenient vehicle parking primarily for purposes of trail access.
6. *First Order Transportation Zone* – This zone will apply to road corridors providing access to the First Order Development and Visitor Use Zone.
7. *Second Order Transportation Zone* – This zone will apply to road corridors providing access to the Second Order Development and Visitor Use Zone
8. *All-terrain Vehicle(ATV) Planning Area* – This zone will designate areas of the plateau where specifically designated ATV trails will be considered. This zone will be located on Darrow Ridge and will be superimposed on selected plateau portions of the Natural Environment Recreation Zone.

The management prescriptions associated with each of the foregoing zones will provide a greater degree of guidance for resource management and visitor use than would be achieved under the other action alternatives, each of which has fewer zones and less specific management prescriptions. In addition, Alternative D calls for the preparation of additional plans and studies to guide management, including, among others, a Comprehensive Interpretive Plan, Oil and Gas Management Plan, Climbing Management Plan, Backcountry Management Plan, a Visitor Experience and Resource Protection (VERP) or similar study to address carrying capacity, and a study of river crossings by horse trails.

Overall, the level of development and types of facilities proposed over the planning horizon of 15 to 20 years will remain essentially the same as currently exists. The notable exceptions include new sites in the southwest portion of the National Area where NPS has been actively acquiring land in recent years. The Darrow Ridge and Tar Kiln Ridge areas will benefit greatly from these changes, since no designated facilities are currently available in these areas.

There will be no significant changes for the First Order Visitor Use and Development Zone. Bandy Creek, Blue Heron, and the Headquarters area are essentially built out, although this management zone allows some changes or additions, such as construction of a facility for museum collection storage, which is badly needed. A number of Second Order and Access Zone type facilities will be improved or developed. The new sites are mostly small Access type areas (essentially trailheads) and mainly in the southwest.

Under Alternative D, the NPS will devote considerable effort and resources to improving the National Area's road and trail system. A principal feature of Alternative D is a roads and trails plan that sets forth the official road and trail system for the National Area. Henceforth, public use of roads and trails will only be allowed on the official system; all trails not expressly included as part of the official system will be designated as administratively closed. In addition, public use of a particular road or trail will be limited to the designated use set forth in Alternative D, with certain limited exceptions. Each road and trail in the official system will be constructed and maintained in accordance with a standard that supports the designated use(s) and also is consistent with desired resource conditions in the surrounding area, or zone.

It has long been recognized that while the National Area has many miles of trails, there exist certain gaps in what could be a more integrated trail system offering a better visitor experience. The NPS will address these gaps via such actions as constructing a connector linking the networks surrounding Station Camp and Bear Creek horse camps and completing the John Muir Trail. Shorter trails will also be addressed, as in the proposed substitute for the Blue Heron Campground Spur foot trail, which currently follows the access road, and an extension off an existing foot trail that would link all the overlooks located near the headquarters complex.

Alternative D increases the trail miles available to hikers, equestrians, and bicyclists from the levels currently maintained by the National Area. The official trail system includes trails specifically dedicated to each of these user groups, plus a larger universe of trails that are "shared use." Generally speaking, designated horse trails will also be open to hikers and bicyclists, while designated bike trails will be open to both bicyclists and hikers. Specified hiking trails will also be open to bicyclists in order to provide more opportunities for this increasingly popular activity.

In implementing Alternative D, the NPS will continue the use of a trail type known as "multiple-use trail." In the National Area, this trail type is typically known for allowing motor vehicles, horses, hikers, and bicyclists on a single route maintained to trail rather than road standards. Under the selected action, persons driving motor vehicles that are *licensed* and *registered* may use any multiple-use trails that will accommodate such use. ATVs will generally not be permitted on any multiple-use trail, park road, or any other trail type. However, visitors will be permitted to use ATVs on multiple-use trails while actively hunting, during big game season only. Multiple-use trails will be closed to ATVs at all other times of the year. Big game season is defined for this purpose as the legal season for white-tailed deer and, in jurisdictions where they are regulated as "big game," wild boar. (In the future, elk and bear may be available for hunting; these species would also be classified as "big game"). Alternative D also provides that ATV routes for year-round general recreational use may be designated within "planning areas" identified for consideration of such use. The plan includes two such planning areas in the Darrow Ridge area. These planning areas will provide the opportunity to design an experimental prototype system.

Under Alternative D, the route of the old O&W railroad will provide continued passenger vehicle access to the O&W bridge from the east. The route will be improved to the extent of providing safe passage. Within its jurisdiction, Scott County has acquired and maintained a deeded interest in the former O&W right-of-way. This interest is coupled with an implied dedicated easement in favor of the public to travel on the right-of-way from the eastern boundary of the National Area to the point it intersects North White Oak Creek. The NPS will coordinate with Scott County on the necessary improvements to achieve desired use and resource conditions. The O&W route west of North White Oak Creek has been determined to be abandoned. This portion of the route, extending to trail connections near the western boundary of the National Area, will be a trail designated for foot, horse, and bike use, as recommended by previous studies. The route will be brought to a standard suitable for the intended trail uses.

Outreach to surrounding counties and towns will continue in order to increase and strengthen existing relationships. Cooperation will specifically be sought to jointly provide services outside the National Area that would provide visitors and travelers with information about area opportunities. The Stearns Depot visitor center, co-located with the Big South Fork Scenic Railway, is an example of an off-site visitor facility with a park partner. Opportunities will be pursued to cooperate with others for more comprehensive and effective visitor service. Suitable locations could be located in or near Oneida-Huntsville, Jamestown, Rugby, and the Stearns-Whitley City-Winfield area.

Alternative D also reaffirms the existing NPS partnerships with Rugby and with the McCreary County Heritage Foundation, operator of the Big South Fork Scenic Railway. These relationships are mutually beneficial, offering visitors a greater variety of related experiences.

Increased staffing and funding are called for under Alternative D. However, it would remain for the National Area to balance the rate of plan implementation with actual increases in staffing and funding. Projects described in Alternative D would only be implemented to the extent that funding and staffing allowed.

OTHER ALTERNATIVES CONSIDERED

The *Supplemental Draft GMP/EIS* and *FGMP/EIS* evaluated three other management alternatives for the National Area, designated Alternative A, Alternative B, and Alternative C (No Action), respectively.

Under Alternative A, the NPS would manage the National Area primarily to provide rustic, off-the-beaten-path track experiences in natural surroundings. Facilities and other conveniences would be offered in only a small percentage of the National Area. The National Area would be divided into three management zones, namely the primitive recreation unit, the enhanced recreation unit, and the backwoods recreation unit. The

primitive recreation unit would encompass the legislatively defined gorge area, except for the gorge access routes, also defined by the legislation. This zone would be managed primarily to perpetuate and enhance natural conditions. The enhanced recreation unit would be located on the plateau above the gorge and would encompass already existing developments. Six of the gorge access routes would also be included in this unit. These are Highway 92, County Road 1363 near Yamacraw, the road to Blue Heron mine, Highway 297, Zenith road, and Highway 52. The backwoods recreation unit would cover the remaining areas of the plateau not designated as enhanced recreation unit.

Under Alternative B, the NPS would develop more facilities than under either alternative A or D in order to provide for active and convenient participation in a variety of resource-compatible activities. Alternative B would apply the same three management units called for in Alternative A, and would do so in many of the same areas. However, under Alternative B a larger portion of the plateau would be designated enhanced recreation unit. Eight gorge access points would be designated enhanced recreation unit and would include Alum Ford, Highway 92, County Road 1363 near Yamacraw, Blue Heron road, Station camp road, Highway 297, Zenith road, and Highway 52. The backwoods recreation unit would be the remaining area of the plateau. The remaining three gorge access points would also be designated backwoods recreation unit and are Peter's Bridge, Burnt Mill Bridge, and Worley. As in Alternative A, the primitive recreation unit would be the designated gorge. Enhanced recreation unit locations would be focused around existing development, as in Alternative A, and would also be in those areas considered suitable for potential future use and development. Suitability factors include access to roads, past and present recreation and other uses, proximity to existing or expected development outside the National Area, and reasonable extensions of internal development areas.

Under Alternative C (No Action), the NPS would essentially maintain the status quo. No management zones would exist to guide management, and no new developments would be undertaken, except on a piecemeal basis.

BASIS FOR DECISION

The selected action has the greatest potential of all four alternatives to preserve the unique resources of the National Area while making available a wide range of recreational opportunities to the visiting public. With eight management zones specifically tailored to the diverse resources and facilities of the National Area, the selected action provides National Area management and the public with a higher degree of information and guidance concerning objectives, management, use, and development than do the other action alternatives. In so doing, it offers the broadest level of resources protection, interpretation, visitor services, and the optimum opportunity for high quality visitor experiences. Furthermore, selected action would promote the most extensive cooperation between the NPS and governmental and non-governmental partners in the

two States encompassed by the GMP. Therefore the NPS has opted to select this alternative.

The FGMP/EIS is a programmatic statement. The proposed action and alternatives each consist of a basic management framework for future decision making. Consequently, the statement presents an overview of potential impacts relating to the proposed program for each alternative. In the future, implementation of specific actions included in the approved final plan would require the preparation of more detailed environmental assessments. This ROD is the last necessary action under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) regulations and completes the general management planning process for the National Area.

BACKGROUND OF PLAN

Congress authorized Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area in Section 108 of the Water Resources Act of 1974, Public Law 93-251. The enabling legislation states that the National Area is authorized “for the purposes of conserving and interpreting an area containing unique cultural, historic, geologic, fish and wildlife, archeological, scenic, and recreational values, preserving as a natural, free-flowing stream the Big South Fork of the Cumberland River, major portions of its Clear Fork and New River stems, and portions of their various tributaries for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations, the preservation of the natural integrity of the scenic gorges and valleys, and the development of the area’s potential for healthful outdoor recreation.” Under the terms of the legislation, responsibility for land acquisition and facility development rested with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (Corps) until November 15, 1990, at which time full management responsibility shifted to the NPS.

The FGMP/EIS for Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area has been prepared in order to provide a comprehensive framework plan prepared according to NPS policies and procedures. Previously, the National Area operated along the lines of a 1981 Master Plan prepared by the Corps, plus specific plans prepared since jurisdiction was transferred from the Corps to the NPS in 1990. Significantly, the Corps Master Plan never received formal approval. The selected action will allow National Area management to operate under an approved plan that has undergone extensive public participation.

ENVIRONMENTALLY PREFERABLE ALTERNATIVE

The environmentally preferable alternative is defined as “the alternative that will promote the national environmental policy as expressed in Section 101 of NEPA. Ordinarily, this means the alternative that causes the least damage to the biological and physical environment; it also means the alternative which best protects, preserves, and enhances

historic, cultural, and natural resources” (Forty Most Asked Questions Concerning Council on Environmental Quality’s NEPA Regulations, 1981).

Section 101 of NEPA states that “...it is the continuing responsibility of the Federal Government to ... (1) fulfill the responsibilities of each generation as trustee of the environment for succeeding generations; (2) assure for all Americans safe, healthful, productive, and aesthetically and culturally pleasing surroundings; (3) attain the widest range of beneficial uses of the environment without degradation, risk to health or safety, or other undesirable and unintended consequences; (4) preserve important historic, cultural, and natural aspects of our national heritage, and maintain, wherever possible, an environment which supports diversity, and variety of individual choice; (5) achieve a balance between population and resource use which will permit high standards of living and a wide sharing of life’s amenities; and (6) enhance the quality of renewable resources and approach the maximum attainable recycling of depletable resources.”

Based on the national environmental policy goals stated above, the environmentally preferable alternative is Alternative D, the selected action. Alternative D best meets the full range of national goals. The selected action preserves important aspects of our natural, historic and cultural heritage by committing to land acquisition, research, and preservation actions needed for the long-term protection of the

The selected action attains the widest range of neutral and beneficial uses of the environment without degradation by limiting new onsite development, adaptively using several of the existing park structures, and providing a range of visitor opportunities appropriate to the resource limitations of the area.

The selected action provides an environment that supports diversity by committing to continued research, interpretation, and education about the diverse cultures and traditions that contribute to the rich heritage of the Big South Fork region. The visiting public will be offered a variety of choices in how they learn about and experience the park and region through the services of a regional visitor center, and the many different interpretive media, programs, demonstrations and special events offered by the National Area.

Further, the selected action achieves a balance between human population and resource uses by providing a balance between programming and development at the park units to ensure the public has adequate access to park resources while ensuring that use levels will not exceed the resource limitations of each site. The activities of the National Area, including the joint visitor facilities and other partnership commitments, will enhance tourism in the region and contribute to the regional economy, thereby helping to contribute in general to improvement in regional amenities and the standard of living.

MEASURES TO MINIMIZE ENVIRONMENTAL HARM

All practicable measures to avoid or minimize environmental impacts that could result from the implementation of the selected action have been identified and incorporated in the selected action. These measures are presented in the FGMP/EIS. However, due to the programmatic nature of the general management plan, specific implementation projects will be reviewed as necessary for compliance with the NEPA and other applicable Federal and State laws and regulations prior to project clearance and implementation. Specific measures to minimize environmental harm will be included in future planning actions needed to implement the FGMP/EIS. These plans include archeological surveys, hazardous substance surveys, a resource management plan, cultural landscape reports, a land protection plan, as well as development concept plans and schematic design documents for future visitor centers and a curatorial facility.

The following measures will be implemented by the National Area to avoid or minimize environmental harm as a result of implementing the selected action, or to enhance protection of resources.

- The National Area will engage in additional study, data collection, and monitoring, especially of natural resources, special status species, archeological and ethnographic resources, historic structures and furnishings, cultural landscapes, and visitor uses to provide the knowledge base needed to make informed decisions for the long-term protection and preservation of Area resources.
- Coordinate and consult with the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) and State authorities over threatened and endangered (listed) species, so as to avoid impacts and conflicts. Directed surveys may be indicated, depending on the species in question. It may be possible to take particular steps not only to avoid or minimize adverse impacts to threatened and endangered species, but even to enhance their populations and habitat.
- The National Area will provide appropriate architectural treatment and use of park historic structures. Treatments will conform to the *Secretary of Interior's Standards*. Should the NPS acquire any additional resources as part of this plan's implementation, these resources will be surveyed to determine the nature and extent of hazardous materials contamination, if any.
- The National Area will consult with the pertinent State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) and conduct cultural resource/archeological surveys if indicated prior to undertaking any construction involving excavation on existing or newly acquired property.
- Short and long-term soil disturbance and vegetation loss from construction activities, including parking areas, pulloffs, roads, trails, utility lines, public facilities, and landscape restoration, will be minimized through appropriate erosion control and revegetation.

PUBLIC INVOLVEMENT

As part of its efforts to comply with NEPA, letters announcing the planning effort were sent to interested officials, agencies, and organizations, with information regarding how interested parties could suggest issues to be considered by the planning team. Notified agencies included the USFWS and the SHPO for Kentucky and Tennessee. Early on, the NPS conducted a total of nine scoping meetings for the general public in local and regional locations. The purpose of these meetings was to gather input from the public, determine which issues to address in the EIS, and inform the public, agencies, and stakeholders of possible ideas and options for the GMP. Over time, the mailing list of elected officials, agencies, organizations, and individuals grew to contain approximately 500 entries. Newsletters were used to explain the planning process, discuss various influences on that process, announce public meetings, report back to the public, and provide opportunity for comment. The University of Kentucky, under contract, obtained public comment from local persons who typically do not attend government sponsored public meetings.

Six open houses were held after issuance of the first *Draft GMP/EIS*. Based in large part on comments received on this initial draft, NPS decided to prepare a more detailed supplemental draft GMP/EIS that would contain a roads and trails plan. Three focus groups were formed, and, in a total of nine meetings, the groups provided input on a variety of topics, including desirable characteristics of a road and trail system for the National Area.

In January 2003, NPS published the *Supplemental Draft GMP/EIS* and mailed copies to all persons on the project mailing list who had asked to receive a copy. The *Supplemental Draft GMP/EIS* was also available at local libraries and park headquarters and was posted on the park's web site at <http://www.nps.gov/biso>. In March 2003, four open houses were held to receive comments on the *Supplemental Draft GMP/EIS*. The latter meetings were held in Huntsville, Tennessee, Wartburg, Tennessee, Allardt, Tennessee, and Whitley City, Kentucky.

A total of 171 written comments on the *Supplemental Draft GMP/EIS* were received from individuals, groups, and government entities, including Fentress County, Tennessee, Scott County, Tennessee, Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation, the Kentucky State Nature Preserves Commission, the USFWS, and the NEPA Program Office of the Southeast Region of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Comments were generally supportive of the proposed action, and specifically of Alternative D.

FINDINGS ON IMPAIRMENT OF NPS RESOURCES AND VALUES

The NPS has determined that implementation of Alternative D of the FGMP/EIS will not constitute impairment to the resources and values of the National Area. This conclusion is based on an analysis of the environmental impacts, the public comments received, and the professional judgment of the decision-maker guided by the direction in *National Park Service Management Policies (2001)*. Although the proposed action could have some adverse impacts, in all cases these would be the result of actions taken to make particular areas accessible to the public or to preserve other resources and values. Overall, the selected action results in major benefits to park resources and values and provides enhanced opportunities for public use and enjoyment. The selected action does not result in impairment to these areas.

In determining whether impairment may occur, park managers consider the duration, severity, and magnitude of the impact; the resources and values affected; and direct, indirect, and cumulative effects of the action. According to NPS policy, “An impact would be more likely to constitute an impairment to the extent that it affects a resource or value whose conservation is: a) Necessary to fulfill specific purposes identified in the establishing legislation or proclamation of the park; b) Key to the natural or cultural integrity of the park or to opportunities for enjoyment of the park; or c) Identified as a goal in the park’s general management plan or other relevant NPS planning documents.” (Director’s Order 55)

This policy does not prohibit impacts to park resources and values. The NPS has the discretion to allow impacts to park resources and values when necessary and appropriate to fulfill the purposes of a park, so long as the impacts do not constitute impairment. Moreover, an impact is less likely to constitute impairment if it is an unavoidable result of an action necessary to preserve the integrity of park resources or values.

One of the most visible impacts to the National Area is the proposed development of entry roads, parking areas, and trails at certain sites. This development will result in adverse impacts to soils, plants, and wildlife habitat that are negligible to moderate, short- and long-term. In addition, it will affect the cultural landscape of each site by introducing a type of development not previously located in those areas, as well as associated vehicular and pedestrian activity. However, these impacts will not constitute impairment given the fundamental responsibility of the NPS to provide public access and opportunities for public enjoyment. In addition, mitigating actions would reduce the potential magnitude of adverse impacts. Such actions include using the best available data, including archeological and cultural landscape research, to sensitively locate development.

An indirect adverse impact will be changes to the character of particular areas due to increased traffic in the areas surrounding development zones and the potential for changes in land uses. These ripple effects from opening parks to the public and attracting

visitors to developed sites and potentially affecting adjacent land values are an unavoidable consequence of implementing the establishing legislation for the National Area and consequently will not constitute impairment. Through the National Area's selected action, including partnership efforts with local communities, organizations, and other entities, every effort will be made to minimize the environmental impact of proposed visitor-related development.

In conclusion, the NPS has determined that the implementation of Alternative D, the selected action, will not result in impairment of resources and values in the National Area.

Approved:

/s/ Patrica A. Hooks

Patricia A. Hooks, Regional Director
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May 26,2005

Date